

The Dragon and his Boy

by BenRG

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Summary: A compilation of some How to Train Your Dragon shorts that I've written, including bits that may ultimately appear again as parts of full-length stories. May include Hiccup/Astrid and Fishlegs/Ruffnut

1. Birthday Belle

****How to Train Your Dragon****

Excerpts File - "The Dragon and His Boy"

****Disclaimer****

How to Train Your Dragon was created by Cressida Cowell and adapted for motion pictures by DreamWorks.

****Author's Notes****

This is a repository for my H2TYD short stories and excerpts. They are not necessarily related although most have the continuity and the fanon of my under-development full-length story 'Saga of the Ages'.

This story is set a few months after the end of _How to Train Your Dragon_ and about the same period before the beginning of _How to be a Pirate_ in my own personal mental hybrid of the two universes. Astrid is turning thirteen and all the other Riders are twelve or thirteen. If you think she's implausibly mature for her age, just remember that the participants in youngest recorded Viking wedding were both twelve! A Viking child had to grow up very fast.

A note on Dragonese: In the books Cressida Cowell tells us that the Dragons could talk in a specific language called Dragonese. In the films, none of the dragons are shown making any complex vocalisations that could be any kind of spoken language. I have borrowed an idea from Anne McCaffery and made Dragonese a form of telepathic communication that is only possible between the dragon and their

chosen Rider. As well as allowing the author to resolve one of the many differences between the two universes, it also allows me to add some tension between the Dragon-Riders and the rest of the Vikings of Berk; if only the Riders could actually speak to the Dragons, misunderstandings can occur.

Censor: K+

****Birthday Belle****

"I will not panic," Hiccup assured Toothless. The Night Fury didn't roll his eyes but his general body language seemed to communicate condescending scepticism. "I won't!" the boy insisted. "I meanâ€¦ it's only a _birthday party_ for Odin's sake! As son of the Chief, I've attended dozens of them! Why should this be any different?"

Toothless shot his rider a look of disbelieving scorn. _It is different because this particular party is in honour of a female that you would like as a mate_, the Night Fury said in Dragonese. Hiccup couldn't help shiver slightly at the still-new sensation somewhat like ice cold water flowing over his brain as the dragon's mental focus, feelings and perceptions washed over him to communicate Toothless's thoughts. _I know it is different because, ever since Astrid specifically invited you three weeks ago, you have been rehearsing and re-rehearsing every possible move and word!_

"No one except Fishlegs has ever actually _invited_ me before," Hiccup responded lamely.

A wave of love and reassurance washed over the boy. _I understand. Nonetheless I do think over-preparation could be as damaging as under-preparation._

Hiccup sighed in frustration at his dragon's relentlessly rational mind-set. He ran a hand through his auburn hair and immediately started fretting that he was making it messy. That brief spike of panic made him pause. _Gods! I _am_ on edge! Since when has my hair _not_ been messy?_ Toothless, well aware of his Rider's frame of mind, offered him a gummy smile of triumph. The boy tried to glare at his friend in a quelling way. "Look, she's special!"

Maybe you should tell her that.

Hiccup shot his dragon a sickly nervous grin. "Yeah, I'm planning to. _That's_ why I'm nervous."

Toothless's only response was a strange, purring, chuffing sound that Hiccup knew was the dragon's approximate imitation of human laughter. The boy shot the dragon a dirty look which affected the big creature not in the slightest. "Come on, we'd better get going."

Hiccup walked out of the Haddock family longhouse onto the rocky platform upon which it sat, high above the village of Berk. It was evening, a time that came very, _very_ early in the autumn of this spot, just a few degrees away from 'Freezing to Death'. Like all autumn evenings here, the sun was going down in a spectacular display of varying shades of red. Unusually, there were not thick banks of cloud, heavy with early wintry rain or even the first sleet of the inevitably long and awful Berk winter season. Instead, only light

cirrus clouds scudded across the sky.

Fastening the door latch, Hiccup turned to the sunset and paused, tightening his woollen over-cloak around him. With an impatient grumble, Toothless nudged his human friend with his snout. "Hold on, pal; want to see something," Hiccup responded.

Slowly the sun edged lower and lower, flattening out against the western horizon and turning both the clouds and the ocean into sheets of blood red. It really looked as if the sky and sea together had been set alight!

You shouldn't stare at the sunâ€¦! Toothless paused at Hiccup's wordless gesture, his trust in his Rider telling him that there must be a reason for his behaviour.

Hiccup kept his gaze on the sinking sun. Then, just as he had been told, just as it dropped below the horizon there was a flare of green from the very upper-most tip of light like an emerald had been held up to the light. Hiccup smiled. He didn't know if that was any kind of omen but he chose to believe that it was and that it was a good one. "What do you know," he added aloud. "Gobber was _right_! There _is_ a green flash!"

The Lore-master is loved and respected by all of dragon-kind for his courage and wisdom.

Hiccup looked over at Toothless in surprise. "Really?" The Night Fury responded by grinning widely.

_No, actually we all suspect that he is more than slightly crazyâ€¦! but _we're_ not going to tell him that!_

Hiccup laughed and slapped his friend's flank. "Okay, pal! Come on, let's go!"

* * *

><p>It was less than two minutes later that Toothless gently dropped to the ground outside the Hofferson family's longhouse. Astrid's Deadly Nadder, Thunder, was standing outside the house, scrutinising any visitors with a suspicious glare. As soon as she and Toothless identified each-other, the two dragons exchanged friendly head-bobs in greeting.<p>

As Hiccup dismounted, Toothless caught him up on the latest gossip. _Thunder advises that I remain outside with her_. The Night Fury growled slightly in displeasure. _Her Rider's parents do not want any dragons inside their home_.

Hiccup reached over to give his friend a scratch on the sensitive neck scales, making him thrum happily. "It's nothing personal, buddy," he assured the Night Fury. "I doubt that there's enough room for you all to come in and join the party anyway!"

Toothless still emanated considerable annoyance but he didn't seem inclined to rebel or cause trouble. Instead, he glared up at the side of the house. _Don't you two dare cause trouble_, he warned fiercely.

In the deepening twilight, Hiccup blinked upward in the direction Toothless was looking in confusion. Then he saw what his dragon-friend had seen and grinned as he saw the two Terrible Terrors that, according to Astrid, had 'adopted' the Hofferson family as their own – the male was Snapjaws and the female was Bluebell, if he remembered correctly. Snapjaws glared down at Hiccup and hissed a territorial warning. Bluebell slapped the male Terror over the back of the head with her wingtip and Hiccup had to laugh at this oh-so-Astrid act.

Hiccup looked back at his friend and saw that he had settled on the grassy bank that separated the longhouse from the cliff above the sea along with Snotlout's Monstrous Nightmare, Firewurm, and the Thorston twins' Hideous Zippleback, Snortgas and Sparkflame, whilst Thunder continued her sentinel watch. "You gonna be okay pal?"

The ground is warm. You go ahead and enjoy yourself. Be easy.

Hiccup nodded and turned back to his destination, walking over to the front door. "Hello the house!" he called out loudly.

After a moment, the door swung open to reveal Astrid's mother, Ingrid. Like many Viking women, she was quite surprisingly tall and had long, golden-blond hair; hers was tied up in the traditional braid that identified her status as a married woman. "Hiccup! Hello!" the woman greeted him with a genuinely warm smile. She peered around, clearly trying to see if the boy was alone. "Um – Where's your – dragon?"

Hiccup restrained his urge to roll his eyes at both the slight but clear edge of fear in the woman's voice and the obvious subtext that she had intended to say 'monster' rather than 'dragon'. Certain wounds healed slowly, it seemed, if they ever healed at all. "He's resting with Thunder and the other dragons, Ma'am," he responded politely. "She warned us that you didn't want any of the dragons to come in."

Ingrid shot the only child of her Chieftain a strange look. "Oh? Um – how did it – _she_ know that?"

"Well, Astrid would have told her and, as dragons are talkative, she told Toothless who naturally told me."

Ingrid frowned slightly. She still wasn't quite used to her daughter being able to have a conversation with that blue _behemoth_ of hers without her family hearing a word. "Well, I suppose that's why Snotlout and the Thorston twins didn't raise a fuss about that rule when I told them!"

Frankly, Hiccup couldn't imagine Tuffnut and Ruffnut taking _any_ limit on their actions calmly. That said, looking at the Hofferson home, he didn't think it was likely that Snortgas and Sparkflame would even fit inside. In any case, he bet the two of them were glad to be away from their bicephalic sky serpent's continual need to debate absolutely _everything_.

Meanwhile, Ingrid had stepped to one side, opening the door fully. "Welcome to my home –" she announced formally.

Out of long habit, Hiccup gave the traditional response with barely a thought. "As long as I am here, I shall treat it with the respect as if it were my own."

The young Viking entered the brightly-lit and surprisingly hot interior of the longhouse. As should be expected from a party in honour of one of the daughters of a typically large family, the main hall of the longhouse was quite crowded. Mostly it was Astrid's various relatives. Gobber was there in his role as Astrid's teacher in the war-crafts and Hiccup's father as the clan Chieftain. However, Hiccup's eyes were drawn to a cluster of four youngsters by the main table.

"Hiccup!"

"Boss-man!"

"Oh fearless leader!"

"Cuz!"

Astrid, being Astrid, gave her guest a sober and respectful smile, nodding in greeting. Ruffnut, on the other hand, waved as if she was trying to attract his attention from a league away. Snotlout and Tuffnut swaggered over and delivered simultaneous slaps to the back that nearly sent Hiccup flying. "Guys! Dial down the physical abuse!" he snapped.

"Hey, if you can't take a friendly hand to the back, how are you gonna take a punch, Cuz?" Snotlout sneered. Tuffnut snickered sycophantically. "So, why do you think Astrid invited you anyway? Comedic potential?"

Astrid had glided over and she suddenly delivered a slap upside the head that nearly sent Snotlout sprawling, his helmet clattering across the floor. "Maybe I wanted at least one real Viking at my party, Snotlout," she hissed. "You'll be polite to my guests, if you please!"

Snotlout might make a show of being all brawn and no brain but he was no fool and only a fool would miss the warning in Astrid's voice. He waved his hands in surrender and ran off after his helmet.

"Thanks for the invite, Astrid," Hiccup told the blonde Shield Maiden with a genuine smile. "Iâ€¦ Iâ€¦ Ay-yi-yi-yiâ€¦!" Hiccup hadn't intended a sudden descent into imbecility but coherent thought (let alone speech) was impossible, given what Astrid was wearing.

Astrid in her usual day wear was an intriguing sight that hinted at her femininity but never left one in any doubt that she was a warrior. Tonight, however, she was wearing a long, sleeveless white linen dress with a plunging neckline. Although she was too young to have developed many curves, the dress hid few secrets and made it clear that she was a girl. The girl's hair was unbound from its usual braid and instead trailed down her back like a golden river. The small hair-band that marked her as unmarried looked strangely like a crown in this context. Hiccup swallowed a completely irrational desire to fall to his knees and worship this goddess and finally managed to get the speech centres of his brain working.

"Umâ€¦ New look?" he offered lamely. He immediately winced at how stupid that sounded.

Astrid either didn't notice or was too determined to be polite to comment on it. "Well, as this is my birthday party, I decided to make a bit of extra effort with my looks. I'm thinking that you like it?" There was mischief in Astrid's expression but also a hope that Hiccup wasn't sure that he understood. Before he could reply, Tuffnut broke in.

"Like it? Astrid, you've always been pretty but tonight you're a total pants ripper! The only thing better than that dress is the thought of it off and Iâ€¦" Tuffnut's string of inappropriate comments ended when Ruffnut grabbed his head and dunked it into a bowl of some beverage that had chunks of fruit bobbing around in it.

"I'm sorry," Ruffnut said with a brutal smile as she continued to hold her struggling brother under. "I'm afraid that my idiot brother wasn't able to continue to insult you and humiliate our family because he drowned in a bowl of punch and Hel came to drag his soul away to eternal torment!"

Astrid sighed but it was Hiccup who spoke. "Ruffnut, can you not kill your brother? We don't want any deaths on the premises tonight!"

"Aw!" Ruffnut pouted.

"No, seriously, I'm pretty sure someone being murdered at a birthday party is bad luck or something."

"Really?" Astrid sounded genuinely surprised.

Hiccup turned to look at the girl of the hour. "Seriously, Astrid, knowing this bunch, just about anything can end up bringing bad luck!" Snotlout nodded in agreement with an expression of sad wisdom.

Ruffnut sighed and, with clear reluctance, dragged her now only-weakly struggling brother out of the punch and dumped him on the floor. "Good news, retard," she hissed. "You get to live another night!"

Hiccup shook his head. Surprisingly, the distraction of near-fratricide had allowed him to focus his mind. "Astrid, thank you for inviting me to your celebration. I'm honoured that you thought of me at this time and, yes, you lookâ€¦" Hiccup paused and then used the word that he felt best summed up her current look. "You look beautiful." Astrid beamed in pleasure and Ruffnut rolled her eyes with a teasing but approving grin.

As the two girls walked away, Snotlout flitting around them and trying to be charming, Hiccup squatted down next to the still pathetically coughing and spluttering Tuffnut. "Tuffnut," he said in a deadly, level tone of voice. "If I ever hear you talk about Astrid as if she were a tavern serving girl again, I'll geld you, break your arms and legs and then dump you on the furthest island Toothless can reach; clear?"

Tuffnut looked up in anger at the threat but he saw something in Hiccup's eyes that he didn't like; something new and something that his instincts told him he shouldn't trifle with. "Clear, Boss-man."

Hiccup nodded, rose to his feet and then, with a prodigy of strength that surprised even him, dragged Tuffnut to his feet. "Right, now remember this is Astrid's party so pull yourself together, smile and mingle like a good guest."

* * *

><p>"Fishlegs!" Astrid hugged the heavy-set boy in a way that was very obviously the hug of a sister to a much-loved brother. Hiccup thought that no-one could mistake it for anything else. However, given Ruffnut's quickly-hidden scowl, not everyone was entirely happy with it. "I thought that you wouldn't make it!" Astrid continued.<p>

"I nearly didn't," Fishlegs admitted. "Horrorcow decided that he wanted to come too! Ever tried to manoeuvre a Gronkle through the centre of the village? It isn't easy, I tell you!"

"Why didn't you just fly him here?" Hiccup asked, genuinely confused.

Fishlegs smile was slightly abashed. "Horrorcow invited himself and caught me up half-way here!"

That earned several snickers. "Face it, big guy!" Ruffnut said, slapping the large boy on the shoulder. "Dragons are just not the stay-at-home types! Now we've got 'em, they'll always be part of our lives! No leaving them behind _ever_!"

Hiccup shrugged. "I can't imagine going anywhere without Toothless!"

"That's because you _can't_ go anywhere without him, Hiccup of the Peg Leg!" OW! _Loki's nuts_, Hofferson, are you trying to _cripple_ me?" Snotlout was now hopping on one foot, clutching his Astrid-kicked shin.

"Maybe I _should_," Astrid growled, drawing her knife. "It would be interesting to see how _you_ handle having only one foot!" Fortunately, Hiccup and Fishlegs were able to disarm Astrid before she could perform the said _ad-hoc_ surgery but Snotlout saw death in the girl's cornflower-blue eyes and went as white as fresh-spun linen.

As Ruffnut dragged Astrid away from one of her guests for the second time that evening, it was left to Hiccup to deal with his cousin. "Look, Snotlout," he said quietly, "say what you like about me. Truth be told, your opinion of me has always been worth less to me than gull scat but ruin Astrid's party with your loud mouth and I swear that I will spend the rest of my life making the rest of _your_ life seem like Hel has already claimed you!"

Snotlout tried to summon up a sneer. "Wâ€| What are you going to do? Tell on me to your Daddy?"

Hiccup got into his genuinely surprised cousin's face, his eyes hard. "Oh no; that's just what you'll _wish_ that I did!" There was something about Hiccup's smile that reminded Snotlout that this was the son of Stoic the Vast and Valhallarama the Great Thighed. It suddenly occurred to the dark-haired Viking that pushing the child of such blood to the point where he might get violent was an incredibly _bad_ idea, assuming one had plans to live more than a few minutes.

"Yeah! That's right! Watch your mouth around me in future!" Snotlout squeaked over his shoulder at Hiccup as he made a rapid and panicked retreat.

Firewyrn apologises for his Rider's actions, Toothless remarked from his nest outside, his voice meek as he sensed his Rider's anger.

Hiccup shook his head. _Tell Firewyrn that Snotlout makes his own choices and that he isn't responsible for them._ The boy walked over to Astrid, who was standing by one of the food tables, glaring angrily into a goblet full of the fruit punch that she clearly liked (maybe her mother's recipe or something). "Astrid?"

The girl sighed and managed to summon up a polite smile for her guest. "Yes, Hiccup?"

"Look, I'm _sorry_!"

"For what? Tuffnut being an animalistic troll? Snotlout being an obnoxious little creep because he thinks that makes him look manly? That isn't _your_ fault!"

"Yeah, butâ€¦" The boy sighed. "I guess that as the first Dragon-rider, I feel responsible for all of you and that includes keeping those two in line! I mean, I _am_ the son of the Chief and that means I've got to take the lead!"

"Hiccup, I hate to break this to you but it _isn't_ all about you. Tuffnut and Snotlout would have been their usual rotten selves whether or not you came tonight."

Hiccup was amazed that Astrid had figured that he was regretting attending the party, blaming Snotlout and Tuffnut's behaviour on his presence. _Damn! How is it that she can read me so easily?_ "Anyway," he said aloud, "I've warned them both off and told them to shape up."

Astrid opened her mouth and then closed it again. Her first instinct had been to be angry that Hiccup, the long-despised 'runt' thought that she needed his protection. Then her brain caught up with her warrior instincts and she admitted to herself that Hiccup's only motivation was friendship. He wanted her to have a good time tonight and was trying to make that happen, even if that meant attracting Tuffnut and Snotlout's wrath. The blonde sighed and, without any discernable change of expression, punched her companion on the shoulder. "That's for trying to fight my battles for me!" she declared before seizing Hiccup by the shirt and dragging him close. She touched her lips to his and both felt the tingle. "Thatâ€¦ That is for being an honourable and noble friend," she concluded, her voice suddenly slightly husky.

Both barely-teen Vikings blushed and separated only slowly, acting as if they were in a trance. Neither noticed Snotlout's furious scowl as he observed this display.

* * *

><p>"This is beautiful, Chief Stoic," Astrid said as she cradled the throwing axe that her Chieftain had just given her. "Thank you for your gift and thanks to you too, Hiccup!"<p>

Stoic smirked. "Oh no, girl, that gift's just from me! Hiccup has something of his own for you!"

Astrid frowned. Berk was hardly a rich village and her gifts so far had all been from entire families pooling their resources. Even then, they had been decidedly modest, although they all were accepted in the friendship that they were intended. The thought that Hiccup had somehow got her a gift himself disturbed and yet intrigued her in ways she didn't really understand.

Hiccup grinned in a slightly sickly way. "Yeahâ€¦ uhâ€¦ I guess that's me busted!" he said with a nervous chuckle, running his hand through his hair. He stepped forward, his limp made more pronounced by his nervous state. "Umâ€¦ yeah, so I thought: Everyone's going to get Astrid something practical. So, why not do something different and give her something symbolic and decorative? Something _made_ for her that really reflects _Astrid_?"

Intrigued, Astrid took the fine folded cloth from Hiccup's hands and opened it to reveal something quite unexpected. "Oh, Hiccup!" she gasped. "It'sâ€¦!"

"I know it's not much," Hiccup babbled. "I mean, I'm hardly a master-smith or engraver andâ€¦" He was silenced by Astrid's hug.

"It's beautiful," she whispered into his ear. She stepped back and looked down.

"I designed it as a brooch," Hiccup explained. "I know you don't normally wear them, so I redesigned the eyes for the securing pin to double as fastening points for a cord so you can wear it as a necklace if you want."

Astrid nodded and put it back into Hiccup's hands, making the boy frown in confusion. "Could you put it on for me please?" she asked. With a nervous nod, Hiccup complied, tying the azure-tinted leather cord behind the girl's neck as she held her hair out of the way. She turned around and everyone agreed that the bronze circlet was a wonderful piece of workmanship. Around an eight-pointed star, clearly representing Astrid's given name, a Deadly Nadder, shaped in incredible detail, flew around the circumference of the outer ring past painstakingly-glazed blue sky and white clouds

"For the Heavenly Rider of the Deadly Nadder," Hiccup said quietly, using the title that the Saga-tellers had been using for her. "I noticed, you know, how you love to touch the clouds when you ride on Thunder." Astrid smiled and nodded in thanks, her eyes suspiciously bright.

* * *

><p>"What are you doing 'Lout?" Tuffnut asked as he sidled up to his long-time partner-in-crime as he loitered by one of the food tables.<p>

"That Hofferson is too up-tight for her own good!" Snotlout growled. "She needs to learn to let her hair down and see the world without her stupid daydreams about nobility getting in the way!" The boy's grin turned nasty. "That girl needs to loosen up and I'm just the Viking to do it!"

"Really?" Tuffnut wasn't sure if he was impressed or horrified. "Well, been nice knowing you buddy. Can I have your favourite axe after she kills you?"

Snotlout rolled his eyes. "Don't worry, my plan's fool-proof!" He drew a pewter bottle out of his inside pocket and showed it to Tuffnut, who was instantly in awe.

"Woah! Is thatâ€|?"

"Pure Old Gobber's Reserve!" Snotlout confirmed. "Premium stuff from my dad's personal supply! Now, I've noticed that a certain blonde novice warrior happens to like this here fruit drink, so let's give it a little more kick! After she's loosened up, I'll turn on the ol' Jorgensen charm and that runt Hiccup will realise that she belongs to a _real_ Viking!" Snotlout pulled the stopper out of the lethal spirit and began to pour it into the punch, Tuffnut's malicious but idiotic laughter as a counterpoint to the sound of flowing liquid.

After hiding the 'evidence', Snotlout and Tuffnut began to swagger across the room towards the barrels of the watered-down mead that had been set aside for the younger guests. They had got maybe half-way there when a large, strong hand dropped onto Snotlout's shoulder and Tuffnut was suddenly hoisted into the air by a hand that snatched his collar.

The two boys' eyes widened in horror and instinctive guilt and Spitelout Jorgensen and Ulric Thorston glared at their sons angrily. "Uhâ€| Hi Dad!" Snotlout squeaked, attempting to look innocent and failing.

"What have you been up to boy?" Spitelout snarled. "You are _invited_ to a party and then spend the evening insulting the other guests! Are you _trying_ to dishonour our family?"

Snotlout spluttered for a moment before anger won out. "That little rat Hiccup saidâ€|"

"NOTHING!" Spitelout's roar cut off his oldest son's angry diatribe before it had even begun. "If I was _deaf_, I might have missed your bull's bellowing voice hurling insults at my nephew and propositioning your host but to have my brother, the _Chieftain of our Clan_ ask me if you were _drunkâ€|_? You've humiliated me enough for one night, boy! Get your worthless hide back home and we'll talk about your _punishment_ in the morning!"

Snotlout panicked when he realised that he was about to be absent when Astrid wasâ€¦erâ€¦_relaxed_. "Dad! Can't I stay a little longer?" he pleaded, not caring that it made him seem like a petulant child. "I've kind of got something going on right now andâ€¦"

Spitelout's hand tightened on Snotlout's shoulder, making the bones grind together in interesting and painful ways. "Don't push me, Snotlout. Get out of here right now and I'll try to figure out a way to apologise to Siegfried Hofferson for your disgraceful conduct."

Tuffnut's attention was drawn to his scowling father by a firm shake that rattled his brain in his skull. "As for you, boy, I'm still wondering if it would have been better if Ruffnut _had_ drowned you to save our family from embarrassment after your disgusting words to the girl who invited you to this celebration! You need to learn to _think_ and control your tongue before someone decides to _cut it out_ for you!"

Released and thoroughly chastened, both Viking boys fled the Hofferson longhouse at once. Embarrassed fathers were angry fathers and, right now, neither one was willing to risk provoking their sires any further. Of course, they had left behind a potentially dangerous legacy.

Hiccup wasn't into fruit punch. He might have been if his mother had not died half a dozen years ago but, as it was, his father started him on watered-down mead early and he'd never developed a taste for fruit juices. On the other hand, the punch that Astrid clearly liked obviously had some hidden qualities given its affect on her. As time went by, the girl was relaxing more and more, smiling far more easily, laughing happily and being very charming, walking around with an odd swish to her hips. Ruffnut clearly had been drinking the punch too, given the way she was practically _hanging off_ Fishlegs, whose smile had an edge of total panic to it. Ruffnut's raucous laughter in response to some comment from the heavy-set boy cut through the general hum of conversation.

Suddenly a gentle hand touched Hiccup's shoulder. "Why, Hiccup Horrible Haddock III! What are you doing standing over here by yourself?" He turned to see Astrid, smiling gently, standing behind him. His eyes immediately fell to the brooch/necklace that sat at the meeting spot of her collarbones and it seemed to only make her _more_ beautiful. "Why don't you come and join the party?" she asked, her voice deeper than normal and sounding slightly breathy.

Hiccup shrugged. "I've always been a bit of a wall-flower Astrid. I guess I'm just more of an observer than a participant!"

Astrid chuckled and then, much to Hiccup's shock, pouted cutely, shooting him a soulful gaze that communicated a silent, deep plea. "Be a participant tonight; for me."

Hiccup realised at that moment that he was doomed. He'd do _anything_ for this girl. "Okay," he sighed.

Astrid just held off skipping up and down in excitement. "Oh _thank you!_" The young Viking offered the girl the loop of his arm and she immediately slid her arm into the proffered space. "Come on, I want

you to meet my brothers and sisters!"

* * *

><p>Astrid snuggled closer to Hiccup's side under his arm and under his thick, warm cloak as the two sat on a dry-stone wall outside her family home, looking up at the icily clear night sky. She was only half-listening to Hiccup's voice as she felt warm, comfortable and sleepy. "Is there a dragon constellation?" she asked suddenly.

Hiccup, who had been explaining the rudiments of navigating by the stars, blinked at her in some surprise. He looked up at the sky again. "I don't know," he admitted. He looked down at the dark shapes of the sleeping Toothless and Thunder and smiled. "If there isn't, there should be!" He pointed up. "There!" he announced, pointing to a crescent-shaped arc of stars centred on a particularly bright star that covered the span of a hand against the sky. "Krona Nord! Gobber says that the legend is that Odin took the brightest stars of heaven and had the finest Dwarf artisans forge them into a crown for his wife Freyja; a beautiful and eternal decoration for an eternal beauty!"

"That's nice," Astrid's hand caressed her necklace.

Hiccup noticed. "I wish that I could give you the stars, Astrid."

Astrid smiled. "You've given me the sky, Hiccup! That's a start!" She laughed happily as she remembered all the times, on Toothless or on Thunder, when she had looked upon the clouds from above or had touched the clouds or had come close to touching the Northern Lights and the Moon. She was no fool; she knew that someone had spiked the punch and she was now quite drunk. Right now, though, she was enjoying the weakening of her usual inhibitions and fears too much to worry about it. Her laughter was a sound to which Hiccup found that he was fast becoming addicted. He knew too that Astrid was not entirely in her right mind and felt more than a little guilty about enjoying her in this state. "You're a lot of fun, Hiccup, son of Stoic," Astrid announced. "I wish I knew that a long time ago!"

There was a pause before the girl looked up at the boy and continued in a serious tone of voice. "Ruffnut fancies you, you know! She always has! She once told me that she loves the idea of a man with brain as well as brawn!"

"Well, I've got one of the two," Hiccup said, chuckling self-deprecatingly.

"That's what you think!" Astrid shot back, squeezing one the biceps toned by long hours working at the smithy.

Hiccup blushed at this new version of Astrid who was actually initiating contact! He smiled before continuing. "So, Ruffnut likes a guy with brains as well as brawn, huh?" Hiccup remarked. Thinking of the way the warrior girl had been acting around Fishlegs, he smiled. "I did wonder what was going on there!" He looked down at Astrid, noting the dizzy look in her eyes and, with a sudden reckless courage, asked a question the answer to which he had long pondered.

"What about you? What do you look for in a man?"

Astrid smiled and, for the first time spoke her heart, words she had not even silently spoken to herself. "More than anything a man who would value and love me as I am and not want some perfect ideal that no mortal woman could be!"

Hiccup blinked. "Butâ€¦ you are perfect!" he blurted out before his brain could step in and shut him up.

Astrid hugged Hiccup's arm a little in gratitude. "Thanks, oh Hero of Berk; I'm not sure I agree but I'll take the compliment in the spirit it was intended!" Astrid continued in a more serious tone. "I made that mistake about you, you know. I saw someone so different from the ideals we hear in the Sagas and I assumed that you were no Viking. The fact is though, that you're not some dumb legend, you're Hiccup! The crazy ideas, the machines, the dragons, the honour, the courage despite your fearsâ€¦ They make you what you areâ€¦ and that is perfection all of your own, in my eyes." Suddenly, the girl shifted under Hiccup's cloak, moving to sit in his lap. She extracted her arms to wrap them around his neck. "I'm only thirteen but I look ahead and, the truth is that, whatever my future is, I know that you'll be a part of it."

Hiccup sighed and, feeling incredibly brave, caressed Astrid's cheek. "Do you know what I wish?" he asked rhetorically. Astrid's eyes bid him to continue. "I wish that you were a bit more sober and I was entirely sure that you were fully aware of what you're saying or that you'd even remember it in the morning!"

Astrid giggled a little. "That's your job, Hiccup Horrible Haddock III," she announced seriously. "You've got to gently pull back down the walls that I've put up and have been temporarily knocked down by whatever it was someone put in the punch tonight! You've got to release me from my prison, oh my hero!" The girl emphasised her point by poking Hiccup hard in the chest, knocking the boy off balance. Hiccup fell backwards into the small grassy verge behind the wall, carrying a laughing Astrid with him. The girl landed atop and astride him, supported by knees and elbows.

Hiccup looked up at the girl's face, partly illuminated by sun and moon and just inches away and he was entranced. The stroked her soft cheek again and pushed some of the rebellious bangs aside so he could look into her eyes. "Wowâ€¦! Ohâ€¦! A man could die happy having seen that sight."

Astrid grinned and mock-thumped Hiccup on the shoulder. "That's for not having the guts to say so before now," she said. "This is for saying itâ€¦!" Then their lips met and it was so different from every kiss that went before; prolonged, passionate and warm. Hiccup's hand travelled up to cup Astrid's head so that he could hold her in the kiss, her youthful but subtly curved body warm and perfect as it pressed into himâ€¦ Then there was a definite, noticeable thump as Astrid's head fell limply against Hiccup's chest.

"Astrid?" Her reply was a long, resonant snore. Hiccup couldn't help but chuckle. "Yep, you might be a talkative drunk but when the booze really kicks in, it takes you out with one blow!" Having no desire to remain out here all night, the young Viking considered his situation for a moment. Finally, he rolled slightly so Astrid was

lying on the ground, swaddled with his cloak, rather than on him. Carefully bracing himself on his remaining foot, he pushed himself upright, drawing his artificial foot under him only at the last moment. Once in an upright crouch, he was able to get his arms underneath the sleeping girl and lifted her up. "Time for you to go home, my little Warrior Maiden," he murmured.

"Hiccup warmâ€|" the snoozing girl muttered in her dreams. She snuggled closer into his chest, making the boy's face flush.

Ingrid fussed over her daughter but, with some reluctance, allowed Hiccup to carry her all the way to her sleeping room. From the scowl Sigmund Hofferson gave his daughter's _ad-hoc_ escort, Hiccup decided that the Viking warrior wanted to accuse the boy of being responsible for his daughter's condition but knew it was an accusation that he could not support. However, the warmth of the words that the Astrid behind the wall of her insecurities had spoken gave Hiccup the courage to face the man's disapproval.

After laying the girl on her bed-furs, he dared to place a tiny kiss on her forehead. "Pleasant dreams and I hope it doesn't hurt too much in the morning," he murmured.

* * *

><p>"So, heard the latest?" Fishlegs asked Hiccup as he loitered at the serving window of Gobber's smithy, watching his childhood friend working on casting some tool heads.<p>

Hiccup made sure that the pot of molten iron was securely returned to the furnace before turning to his oldest friend. "What?"

"Astrid has at least as bad a hangover as Ruffnut this morning!"

Hiccup winced. Given that Ruffnut was wearing a _blindfold_ to mitigate her headache, on a scale of 1 to 10, Astrid was probably suffering from a 12½. He'd been a witness as a scowling Ulric Thorston had his middle son apologise to Astrid's dad for his conduct and had wondered whether the reason Astrid was absent was a side-affect of whatever it was that had been dropped in the punch.

"Word in the market is that Snotlout won't be sitting down for a week, his dad whipped him so long and hard." Fishlegs continued. "Turns out that the stuff in the punch was a bottle from Spitelout's personal stash of that Celtic rotgut Gobber makes in his hut; Cost Old Man Jorgensen a pretty tidy packet to buy and he isn't happy with Snotty taking it."

Hiccup nodded. "Maybe my cousin will learn something from this!"

"Do you really think so?" Fishlegs was sceptical. "Well, I figure it's even money whether he'll live long enough to learn any lessons once Astrid hears of it!"

Speaking of Hiccup's mental image of a Valkyrieâ€|" "Hiccup," Astrid announced levelly as she walked over, shading her eyes; even the dull autumn day was too bright for her right now. "We need to talk."

"Yes Astrid?" Hiccup asked as he dropped a box of assorted nails on the counter. The girl winced in agony from the sound. "Sorry," he said more quietly. "What can I do for you?"

"Fishlegs, go find somewhere else to be," Astrid snapped. Fishlegs had already encountered Ruffnut and didn't want to have to deal with _two _badly_- _hung-over warrior girls in one day. He nodded at Hiccup and left in some haste. Astrid watched him go and, drawing in a deep breath, she braced herself as if preparing for a hard battle ahead and turned back to Hiccup.

"Hiccup, Dad says that you kept an eye on me last night after that rat in human form Snotlout spiked the punch at my party. Iâ€¦ I just wanted to thank you." Hiccup's eyes opened wider as the girl pulled out her knife and waved it at him threateningly. "I also want you to swear that you'll never tell anyone if I embarrassed myself last night!"

Hiccup waved his arms placatingly. "Astrid! I'd never do that!"

"You'dâ€¦!" Astrid winced at the sound of her own voice and continued more quietly. "You'd better not," she hissed. There was a long pause before the girl continued, even more quietly and even slightly _timidly_. "Whatâ€¦ what did we do?"

"We talked about the stars, the sky and our ideas of perfection," Hiccup replied truthfully.

"Just that?" Astrid wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed.

"Do you really want to know?" Hiccup asked.

Astrid blushed and suddenly shook her head. "Justâ€¦ don't spread it about. I have a reputation to think about!" Hiccup noticed the desperate plea in the girl's voice and nodded at once, more affected by her fear than her anger. Astrid nodded in thanks. "Umâ€¦ Thank you. For keeping an eye on me, I meanâ€¦ and for agreeing to keep this secret." Then the girl walked off, still shading her eyes.

What did Astrid want? Toothless asked from his grassy bed on the terrace above the smithy.

Hiccup considered that question for a moment. "She wanted to talk about demolishing some walls. I just wonder if I know how to do it in a way that won't hurt her."

2. Echoes of Yesterday

****How to Train Your Dragon****

Excerpts File - "The Dragon and His Boy"

****Disclaimer****

How to Train Your Dragon was created by Cressida Cowell and adapted for motion pictures by DreamWorks.

****Author's Notes****

This is a repository for my H2TYD short stories and excerpts. They are not necessarily related although most have the continuity and the fanon of my under-development full-length story 'Saga of the Ages'.

This story is set about a year after How to Train Your Dragon and is also set fifteen years after the movie. You'll see what I mean in a moment.

This is a bit of a whimsy on my part. Very few of us, if any of us, are what we wanted or imagined as children. What would our child-selves have thought if they could have seen us now? So, I faced Astrid, largely as she is in the movie, with an older and very different Astrid who has lived a life that I bet her child-self could never have imagined. What will they think of each other?

I freely admit that I fail at Berk Viking names. I did my best and I can only apologise at the names I've given to the OCs both featured and mentioned in passing here.

Censor: K+

****Echoes of Yesterday****

Astrid Haddock, wife of Hiccup Horrible Haddock III "Chieftain of the Berk-Wyrm clan of the Vikings, dragon-rider and all-around hero" had decided that her husband was right. Loki did find their clan a source of amusement and did treat them as his playthings!

"Okay, for future reference, keep your mouth shut when you have a passing whimsy," Astrid muttered to herself as she stared at her young visitor.

It was such an innocent thought. She had been tidying up the disaster area that was the living area of the Haddock family longhouse. As she did so, Astrid had found herself thinking about the changes that had occurred in her life that had brought her to this time and place. She had to admit that, if her pre-teen self had known of her future, she would have been horrified. The thought of being a wife and mother, keeping house and being domestic like her own mother would have seemed a fate worse than death! Of course, Astrid had to admit that, sometimes, she wasn't sure how she had reached this point herself! Life had not always gone the way she had planned but, in the end, it had been following the path of duty and honour and being true to her heart that had led her here. Still, she thought, I have to wonder what I would have thought, in that heady summer after Hiccup defeated the Green Death and we later defeated Alvin for the first time, if I had seen me as I am now?

It was at that point that the door to the longhouse slammed open in a most forthright manner and a loud, bossy, young and feminine voice called for Hiccup. There was a pause and then the voice, now edged with menace, continued: "Who are you and what are you doing in Hiccup's house?"

Instinctively, Astrid had whirled towards the hauntingly familiar

voice, dropped into a crouch and drew her knife in one smooth motion. Then, her eyes went very wide when she recognised the girl standing in the doorway, brandishing her knife in a posture that perfectly mirrored her own.

"Well? Who are you? Some kind of _thief_?" Thirteen-year-old Astrid Hofferson spat angrily and twenty-seven-year-old Astrid Haddock finally realised that the gods _did_ have a perverse sense of humour.

* * *

><p>Astrid couldn't help but smile nostalgically at her younger self's closed expression of paranoid suspicion and barely-contained rage. Knowing how much of a hair-trigger temper she had in her years going through puberty, Astrid made a deliberate show of relaxing and sheathing her knife. "Would you believe that I live here?" she asked rhetorically as she straightened up.<p>

Her 13-year-old self smirked viciously. "Not even for a moment!"

"Didn't think so." Astrid narrowed her eyes at her visitor. If she had learnt one thing in the last fifteen years it was that nothing was automatically as it seemed. She was still the paranoid one and she liked to think that it had kept her more trusting and open-hearted husband alive on occasion. "So, who are you?"

The blonde girl's chin rose proudly. "I am a warrior of the Berk! That's all you need to know!" she declared.

Astrid somehow managed not to roll her eyes in annoyance. _Merciful Odin! I really was the most arrogant, uptight little twit, wasn't I?_ Frankly, no-one could have delivered that line with any degree of seriousness except herself before long association with Hiccup and her other friends extracted the iron rod from her ass. She met her younger self's gaze fearlessly before replying aloud. "Very well, warrior of the Berk, know then that I am Astrid, daughter of Ingrid, daughter of Burntpan, by law woman of the family Haddock, by blood woman of the family Hofferson, Rider of the Deadly Nadder and warrior of Berk. May Odin strike me down if I lie!"

Young Astrid cocked her head, clearly missing the clues in that comprehensive identification. "That _has_ to be a lie!" she insisted. "I don't have any aunts or cousins who have married into Hiccup's family!"

Older Astrid smirked. "No, you don't. That's because I'm not you're aunt or cousin. I'm you!"

"Now I know you're either crazy or stupid!" Young Astrid replied scornfully. She brandished her knife threateningly. "You're coming with me and we're going to find Chief Stoic! He'll decide your fate!"

"Aren't you interested in seeing my proof?" That caught the younger Astrid by surprise. "Firstly, look at this!" Older Astrid pulled up her left sleeve to reveal an old, old scar running from wrist to elbow from where she had been accidentally slashed by one of Thunder's tail spines during one of her earliest attempts to wash her

dragon. The scar, although old and faded, still had the puckered look caused by Nadder venom.

Much against her will, younger Astrid's eyes moved to where her leather arm-bracer covered the very fresh and still-livid scar on her left arm, something that she wore with combined pride and embarrassment - Why did her first scar have to be something she got by accident? "Th... That doesn't mean anything!" she insisted weakly. "I can't have been the first person to have been slashed by a Nadder's spines in that spot!"

"Would they have been able to get the Nadder saliva to heal it?" Older Astrid challenged. "Would they have even known to get it, as it wasn't until Thunder licked my arm that anyone knew that their saliva neutralised their venom? Still, assuming that you're right..." With a smile, she reached up and pulled something from around her neck, a length of cord with a brass medal at the bottom. Time had knocked off some of the blue glaze but the bronze Nadder curved around the outside of the brooch-necklace that Hiccup had given her as a Winter Solstice gift fifteen long years ago was still instantly recognisable.

Young Astrid's knife struck the dirt floor, compressed by years of feet, both human and draconic, with a surprisingly loud clatter as it fell from suddenly-nerveless fingers. Almost in a dream, she drew down the neck of her wool vest to reveal a duplicate of the medallion, this one still freshly glazed, its brass shining in the light streaming through the door.

The girl stepped forwards and walked over to her counterpart. Understanding the girl's wish (it was her, after all) the older woman knelt and let Astrid compare the two medallions. "Hiccup made this himself," Young Astrid whispered. "There's not another like it in the world! I... How... How is this possible? You... You're... me! You're me and you're... old!"

"Baldur's moustache! I'm not that old!" older Astrid muttered to herself. Okay, she was twenty-seven and had been married for a decade, but she was hardly ancient! Poor old Gobber was still hovering around at over the age of 60 and was passing himself off as the Clan Elder! That's old! Her younger counterpart didn't hear; her eyes were fixed on her older self's gravid belly, just visible under her baggy over-tunic in this fifth month of pregnancy. "Why do you think I was cautious?" she asked. Without asking, the girl put her hand on the bump, her expression showing a great internal conflict. "Our fourth," Astrid told her younger self quietly.

"Our...?" There was a look of painful confusion, of warring hope and fear on the girl's face. "P... Please...? Who is your... my... our... Who am I going to marry?" Suddenly, what her older counterpart said jumped forwards in the girl's memory. "Hiccup! I'm... I'm going to marry Hiccup!" Older Astrid couldn't help but grin at her younger self's expression as it went from horrified amazement through wonder, astonishment and, finally, reaching a joy that made her face shine. Yes, Astrid remembered, from those two nights after the battle with the Green Death that she had sat with Toothless, keeping vigil over the unconscious Hiccup, listening to his fevered murmurings, this was a destiny that had been in her heart. "Is he...?"

"The very greatest," Astrid insisted doughtily. "One day, sagas will be written about what he has done!" She stood and took her younger self's hand. "Come on. I think that we have a lot to talk about."

* * *

><p>Young Astrid looked at the small pewter cup uncertainly. "I'm... not used to mead." The girl somehow managed to keep a scowl off her face as the woman that she was now sure was her older self rolled her eyes in mocking disbelief. _Baldur's moustache! When did I start being such an impatient, condescending harpy?_

"This is the watered down stuff I keep for the kids," older Astrid said in a patient tone that worked pretty well on her three 'little treasures'. She was amazed how much her experience with Cutter, Flashpan and Gutspill was giving her a handle on how to communicate with her volatile younger self. "It's the wrong season for fruit juice and fresh water's still something that we need to conserve, especially during high summer."

The younger Astrid took an experimental taste and noted, with some pleasure, that it was watered down to just the consistency that she liked... which made sense when you thought about it.

Sitting on one of the benches at the dining table, she looked around the dining area, set just off the fireplace, which had a pot containing what she presumed was a stew for tonight's evening meal bubbling away on a hook over the flames. The weird thing was that she had been here _only last night_, from her perspective. She had dined with Hiccup and Stoic, mostly because her mother was busy fussing over her oldest sister, who was about to give birth to her first child and, frankly, didn't want her other children underfoot. However, despite the familiarity, many things had changed. There were children's toys lying around and new decorations on the walls. Being Astrid, her eyes immediately fell on two mismatched swords hung above the fireplace. "Are those my... your swords?"

"The bottom one is. The top one is Hiccup's sword, Gyrebane."

Astrid frowned. Hiccup was... _Hiccup_. Okay, he knew what end of an axe to hold and was able to protect himself fairly well with a shield but she had a hard time imagining him being able to actually fight, especially with his weird metal peg-leg encumbering him. From Hiccup's description of how he held off Alvin the Treacherous until the Monstrous Strangulator grabbed the Outcast pirate, it sounded like a fairly inelegant brawl, fought with fists, sticks and stones; hardly a classic duel out of the Sagas.

"It's his second, of course," her older self was remarking with a slight smile, her expression thoughtful as she remembered battles past. "The first was destroyed by the acid blood of a Deadly Shadow!"

"He killed a Deadly Shadow?" That question was asked in a much-impressed tone. It was funny that Younger Astrid should have immediately assumed that the sword was destroyed in delivering the death-blow to an evil dragon. No other scenario seemed to make sense to her.

"He killed _the_ Deadly Shadow." Younger Astrid nodded in response to

her older self's words, understanding this immediately to be a reference to the dragon that killed Hiccup's mother half a dozen years ago from her perspective. Older Astrid was continuing. "He forged Gyrebane from a sword he took from the Romans' war leader during their first attack on Bogg. It's served him well, through the years."

Younger Astrid's quick wits picked up on the unfamiliar name. "What's a Roman?"

"Hey! I'm not telling you everything!" older Astrid said with a smirk. "I don't know how much the gods will allow you to remember but I'm not going to spoil every surprise!" The woman shook her head. "Yes, Hiccup can use a sword, although we... _I_ had to work very hard to get him to train himself to the level of competence he needed." The older woman paused. "The axe is mine," she continued, pointing to a long-shafted twin-bladed axe with hollow blades curving around an upper hand-grip, a small mace head at the base of the main hand-grip and a spear-point between the blades. "Hiccup designed it himself; said that it was meant to match my fighting style!"

Younger Astrid shook her head. "You still fight?" She flushed at the look her older self gave her. "Sorry, I guess I thought..."

"What? That I was all 'domesticated', waiting hand-and-foot on my husband and kiddies and not a warrior anymore?" Older Astrid wasn't so proud that she could resist the temptation to flex, letting her still-toned muscles make the arms of her tunic bulge impressively. Sparring with Hiccup and training her daughter in the war-crafts really kept her in shape! "Nah, I might spend a lot of time at home right now, but I'm still a Rider and I'm still a fighter at heart!" She couldn't help but grimace as some unwelcome memories surfaced. "Someone has to protect the village when the menfolk and the younger women are off saving the world from one threat or another!"

"That happened?" Young Astrid's eyes were wide and excited.

Older Astrid's mind flashed on that horrible day when the Saxon raiders attacked. Only the fact that Fishlegs was leading a band of novice Riders over the southern approaches and had seen their striped sails as they approached had given her enough time to organise a defence. Otherwise it would have been a massacre and she and her children would now all be dead or slaves. She clearly recalled being back-to-back with Ruffnut and Camicazi, slashing away with her custom war-axe and desperately trying to keep her mind on ensuring those womenfolk trained in war-craft remained disciplined and fighting effectively when her every instinct was screaming for her to run to her children, throw them onto Thunder's back and fly away as far and as fast from this threat as she could. "Yes," she said at last, that remembered fear making her voice flat and expressionless. "That happened."

"Sounds great!" Younger Astrid chirped naively. "I can't wait for it to happen! Was it exciting?"

Older Astrid absently rubbed the small scar that marked the place where a Saxon arrow had punched into her right thigh. "It was blood-drenched, frightening and painful. Ruffnut still has nightmares about it." _I do too,_ she added silently. She sighed. "Don't be in a rush to be in a pitched battle, Astrid. I've been in many and the

only thing I've ever felt is fear and rage." Younger Astrid made a show of scoffing but there was something in her older self's eyes that made her restrain a biting comment about 'losing her edge'. Suddenly, she remembered the gut-wrenching terror she felt when the Green Death seemed about to swallow Thunder and her in one bite and also the way she was reduced to cowering on all fours, vomiting helplessly when she saw the savaged ruin of Hiccup's left leg. Maybe she did understand after all.

There was a long, embarrassed pause as the woman and girl processed their different view-points on the experience of battle. Wordlessly, older Astrid pushed the wooden cutting board with bread and cheese on it towards her younger self. Younger Astrid shook her head politely. Right now, food was the last thing on her mind. She looked around herself again and saw the children's toys. With a sudden shock, she realised that they must belong to... to her children! "I'm... You're a mother!" she murmured.

"You can't be more surprised than I was," older Astrid remarked with a wry grin.

"How do you manage?" the girl wanted to know. "I mean... I'm..."

"Impatient? Surly? Prone to violence? More likely to chop someone's arms and legs off than talk through a problem?"

Younger Astrid blushed brightly and scowled resentfully at the far too accurate summation of her personality. "How could you... I have handled raising children? Let alone with only Hiccup as back-up!"

Older Astrid chuckled. "Well, I won't say it was easy. I mean, the twins especially taught me exactly what Ruffnut and Tuffnut's mum must have gone through! It was hard to know what to do and it was a challenge to handle it when things got difficult. Hiccup..." The older version of Astrid paused as she considered her next words. "He was my rock. Whenever I started wondering if I was capable of being a mother he'd be there, telling me that he believed in me. He gave me the confidence to carry on." The woman smiled in reminiscence. "I'll say this much: The moment when they put the twins in my arms, I knew that I'd live and die for them. It was that wonderful." She waved her arms. "Besides they're... they're kids! They can be demanding, they can be obnoxious and they get into stuff but it isn't as if I hadn't already gone through that with the rest of the Riders more times than I cared to! Okay, so I couldn't beat up the kids, but you'd be surprised how effective the Time-Out Corner can be!"

Young Astrid snorted in laughter. "I can't imagine any child of Hiccup being daunted by being forced to sit in a corner! He's at his worst when he's got time to think!"

Her older self laughed. "They're as much mine as his; Flashpan especially! She's all motion! Sitting in a corner is worse than death for her!"

My daughter is called Flashpan, young Astrid thought with a slight smile. It was a tradition in the Barbarian Archipelago, especially amongst high-born families, to give children unappetising names (allegedly to frighten off the goblins) and then let them choose a

more... well, _normal_ name when they reached adulthood. However, she had to say that 'Flashpan' sounded right. Again, that made a sort of twisted sense, given the situation.

"If anything, I was more worried about caring for them than the discipline side of things," older Astrid continued. "I... _We've_ always valued our freedom and independence, after all. Being tied down is one of my earliest fears! I really worried how I'd react to losing that to a family, to a child dependent on me for _everything_!" The older Astrid smiled. "Hiccup was the key. He's always supported me, backed me up and even gave me time off when I needed to get away from caring for the babies!" Astrid smiled as she remembered seeing the four big, tough Viking warriors, Hiccup, Snotlout, Tuffnut and Fishlegs, inspecting the harbour and the fishing fleet whilst carrying their snoozing children in slings. "When I stopped believing, _he_ believed in me and my ability to do this. When I despaired, he tried his best to give me hope." Older Astrid shivered unconsciously as she remembered that horrendous winter fever that took the lives of half the children in the village below five years old; of foregoing food and sleep to tend to the twins as their fevers burned for day after day. She was sure it was the stress of nursing them through that nearly-deadly illness that induced the miscarriage she suffered that winter.

The woman shook her head and returned to the 'here-and-now'. "Oh, don't get me wrong, Astrid: things haven't been all sweetness and light. We do argue and we do fight occasionally. The kids have driven me half-way to murder on occasions but, in the end, we Riders all leant to be a family before the kids came along. It was just applying the lessons and..." Younger Astrid puzzled over the look on her older counterpart's face. "Then there is love. Oh, you can grimace, girl, but the bond you feel for a husband and for a child...? It isn't something you have at once but it is easy to learn, especially when the person is as noble and as warm-hearted as Hiccup."

There was a long pause as young Astrid digested this. "Are you happy?" she asked at last.

"Oh yes," older Astrid assured her. "Make no mistake, it was just duty to the clan and family honour at first but, once we had spent time together, co-operating and living in each other's pockets? Then we were able to build on our friendship, on all the times we had saved each other, made each other laugh and smile and were able to turn it into love. I found that Hiccup wasn't the sometimes-annoying joker and bumbler that I used to think. He's a thoughtful, caring and courageous man with the most amazing ideas. More importantly, I learnt that he is the sort of man who lives and dies to see to it that his duty was done. That's what motivated all his stunts, you know, the desire to do his _duty_ to the Clan."

"I never thought..."

"Of course not; you're still only barely more than a child, Astrid. You still see things from that perspective. I promise you that, as you and Hiccup get older and... _events_ take place in your life, then you'll see more of the real man he is, not the good-natured kid who's always trying harder than he can manage."

Younger Astrid sighed and looked down at her hands in despondency and self-doubt. "I don't know if I can do this," the girl whispered. She

looked at her older self's confused expression. "I mean... most times I can barely stand not having my way! How am I supposed to completely submit myself to a man... even to Hiccup... and have my whole life defined by him and his children? I... I'm scared!"

The girl was shocked when her older self knelt beside her and lifted her chin with a gentle touch that reminded her oh-so-much of her mother. "Astrid, never forget this: This is not something that was forced upon us. It was my... our... your choice. Hiccup offered to have his father void the contract if I asked it of him but I didn't! I wanted this as much as he did, maybe even more! I knew that, as a woman, this was part of my duty to our clan and I knew that there was only one man with whom I could imagine having that manner of relationship! The only one who I could be sure would want Astrid rather than some kind of housekeeper!"

Young Astrid frowned. "Is he a good man?"

"He is the very best. He is gentle, loving, firm when needed and a comfort to me. Astrid... I love him so very, very much." The older woman sighed. "I don't know how much of this you will remember, Astrid. I don't know if this is even real or if it is some kind of vision sent by the gods for some reason. All I know is this: Get to know Hiccup and you will see that I am right, that he is the man to lead our clan and the man to hold your heart."

Young Astrid stood, frowning in concentration. "Thanks... I think..." she said at last. She looked up and saw the angle of the light coming in through the upper windows into the central hall and this made her gasp in horror. "Thor's beard! I promised to meet with the twins by now! I've got to go!"

"Hey, wait!" older Astrid called out as her younger self raced through the door and vanished in the glare of the sunlight compared to the shade of the interior of the house. "Hold on! You've forgotten your...!" Astrid ran out of the house in pursuit of her younger self, onto the flat, rocky platform overlooking the centre of the village, then paused and looked around in confusion. There was no sign of the young blonde anywhere. "What in the gods' names?" The girl was gone as if she had never been... which perhaps she should have expected. She looked down at the blade in her hand. "I never did find this knife again, did I?" she muttered to herself in confused recollection. "That replacement was the first weapon Hiccup ever made for me personally...!"

* * *

><p>Astrid braked to a halt half-way down the hill and slapped her forehead. She'd forgotten her knife in her rush! A knife was more than a weapon, it was an all-purpose tool and no Viking worth the name would be without one. She turned on a heel and ran back to Hiccup and Stoic's house. The first thing she saw as she stepped inside when she arrived was the guy she'd originally come here to see. "Hey! Astrid!" Hiccup grinned up at her from where he was packing his pack, slotting a thick sheath of drawing parchment inside. "I'm just off to Gobber's shop!"<p>

"Hiccup! Have you seen my knife?" The boy shook his head. "Come on, I know it's here!" the girl insisted. "I dropped it when I realised that she was... she was..." The girl's voice trailed off as the

memories danced out of her mind's grasp, as tenuous and elusive as sea mist.

"She who?" Hiccup asked, his face twisted in confusion.

"I... I don't know! I... I can't remember!"

Hiccup was genuinely worried at the look of confused disorientation and mild panic on Astrid's face. He reached out a hand and touched her forehead. "You're okay, right? I mean... you're not feverish? Haven't hit your head or anything, have you?"

Astrid punched the boy on the shoulder. "I'm fine!" she snapped. "I just had a really weird feeling that I've just been talking to someone important and... and it's gone!"

"Maybe you saw one of the gods?" Hiccup teased. Astrid shot him a sarcastic, quelling look. Hiccup waved his hands as if to ward off blows. "Look, message received; if you're sure, then I believe you, okay? That still doesn't answer the mystery of the knife! I know that I'd notice it if it were around here!"

Astrid sighed. "I know! I've had that knife since mum first let me out on my own! Now it's gone, blast my luck!"

"Tell you what," Hiccup offered, "we've just finished some new blanks down at the smithy. Come with me and I'll forge a new one for you while you wait!"

Astrid sighed. "Hiccup, I don't have that sort of money; I don't want any more gifts..."

"Not a gift," Hiccup said firmly. "Listen, Dad says that you guys are my War Party now. That means I'm responsible for you and I'm not having one of my team running around without all her gear! Come on! It's for the good of the Clan!"

Astrid chuckled and shook her head at Hiccup's sly tactics. "Whatever! Okay but I'll pay you back as soon as I have some coins to my name!"

"Great! Toothless!" In response to Hiccup's call, there was a high-pitched sound like a storm wind and Toothless seemed to explode out from behind the Haddock family Longhouse and was alongside the two young Vikings in an instant.

Hiccup mounted his dragon and slotted his metal 'foot' into the control stirrup for Toothless's prosthetic tail. He then offered Astrid a hand to haul her up behind him, which she knocked aside contemptuously and then mounted herself with an acrobatic vault. Then the Night Fury was airborne and gliding down towards the smithy on the harbour front.

"You know," Astrid shouted over the slipstream, "I've been thinking. Maybe we should move out of the village? I mean, Toothless is pretty good at avoiding knocking stuff over with his tail but Snotlout's Firewyrn keeps on freaking out and catching fire every time he sees an axe blade and one day Fishlegs's Horrorcow's gonna knock over a house!"

Hiccup nodded. "I've been thinking about maybe moving us all up to the old beast-hold up on the southern slopes!" He patted his pack. "I've got the drawings for the buildings right here! We can put up a longhouse or two for us riders and barns for the dragons! That way we can train and not scare the snot out of people!"

Astrid smiled. "You really can think ahead! Why haven't I ever seen this before?" _Maybe you didn't really want to see_, a sarcastic voice responded. Astrid suddenly realised that there were hidden depths to this boy. There was more to him than the Dragon-training prodigy and the goof who never failed to make her laugh, the only guy around whom she felt able to just be _Astrid_ rather than some role. She'd always known that, really. Now it was time she explored this side of him a lot more deeply.

Toothless landed with incredible delicacy beside Gobber's shop, making the screams of 'Night Fury!' and panicked retreats by various large Vikings all the more ridiculous.

Astrid looked on as Toothless idly walked up to the shop and spat out a burst of blue-white flame that flash-heated the cobblestones beside the smithy. The Night Fury settled down on the heated stones with a sigh of pleasure and gave the impression that he was going to sleep. "Does Gobber mind him napping beside the shop?" she couldn't help ask. Certainly she'd found it difficult to convince her parents to let Thunder sleep by their house (she hadn't had the courage yet to ask them to let her bring the Deadly Nadder _inside_!).

Hiccup grinned. "Gobber is willing to endure his presence for the 'fringe benefits'. He isn't anywhere near as deeply asleep as he looks and he getsâ€¦ very _annoyed_ when people get loud and disturb him. It's certainly cut down on the number of guys who think that shouting and screaming can get them a refund! He hasn't eaten anyone _yet_, but there is always the riskâ€¦!" Hiccup winked mischievously and Astrid giggled, surprising herself at her reaction to that quip.

For a while the girl watched as Hiccup went to work in honing a blank into a knife. Normally, Astrid found the sight of Hiccup at work nearly hypnotic and sort of blanked out. This time, she found herself watching his whole body's motions for the first time and found that there was a surprising level of agility in movements as he swivelled between furnace, anvil, cooling basin and tool racks. "Hiccup, have you ever thought about learning how to use a sword?" Astrid was surprised by her own words and puzzled over the sense she had that this was _right_ as Hiccup made a self-deprecating demurral. She overrode his false modesty with a snort and a rude gesture. "You can't expect Toothless or luck to win all of your battles, especially now Alvin is so determined to get you!"

"Astrid, I'm not really a fighter. Even if I was, my legâ€¦!"

"We can work around that," Astrid said with an idle wave. "Hiccup, you've got a lot more agility than I think you realise. In any case, I'm not letting the leader of my 'War Party' run around not being able to defend himself! You might not have the raw strength needed to use a battle-axe or a war-hammer but something tells me that a cutting blade like a sword will be perfect for you!"

"Astrid, Iâ€¦!"

Astrid glared at her best friend. "This isn't a suggestion," she growled. "Meet me at the practice arena after evening meal and bring a sword!"

Hiccup swallowed. He wasn't sure that he could fight. However, Astrid was right about being able to defend himself against Alvin's Outcasts. As hopeless as it sounded, he needed to at least try. Besides, he wasn't a fool and when Astrid Hofferson spoke to you in that tone of voice, only a fool refused her.

* * *

><p>"Astrid?"<p>

The woman looked up from her consideration of her knife, twenty years old and yet still fresh and unmarred; testament to the impossible manner in which it had been returned to her. "Hiccup!" she responded and, without hesitation, rose to her feet and stepped into her husband's arms.

Hiccup Horrible Haddock III, Chieftain of the Berk-Wyrms, smiled as he embraced his wife, lowered his head and smelt the unique scent that was ineluctably Astrid in her hair. The woman looked up and returned her husband's smile; their lips met and they silently reaffirmed their love.

"Yuck, Mum! Dad!" Astrid rolled her eyes and waved dismissively at the disgusted cry from her oldest two children. Cutter and Flashpan rolled their eyes too in a disturbing mirrored move.

"Why do they have to do that in front of us?" Nine-year-old Cutter asked his twin sister.

"I think they're punishing us for something," Flashpan replied. With a shrug, the girl turned and jogged up the stairs with her Terrible Terror companion, Grassburn, fluttering in her wake.

"Out of the armour," Hiccup instructed his oldest son. Cutter nodded respectfully and with his lazy Terror, Starlight, squeaking at the sudden jerky motions, ran up the stairs after his twin so they could both store away the practice armour they had been wearing at the arena.

"So, how was your day?" Hiccup asked. "Gutspill wasn't any trouble was he?"

Astrid sighed as her thoughts turned to her four-year-old youngest, probably the one of her children who most took after their father. "It depends on how you define 'trouble' she said as she began to put plates out on the dining table. "He's had his nose buried in the Sagas, Dragon Manual and your drawings all day again! Mark my words, Hiccup, teaching him to read is going to lead to trouble one day! He's going to end up a lore-master like Fishlegs at this rate! Or worse still an inventor!"

"Hey I didn't turn out so badly did I?" Hiccup asked lightly, recognising an old tease when he heard one. Astrid seemed to have to think about that with a forbidding expression on her face. "I thought you liked me and my crazy scholar ways?" Hiccup countered with a

'kicked puppy' pout. He walked over to Astrid and cupped her cheek in his hand, drawing a thumb over her lips. "I know that you like it when I use my head!"

Astrid closed her eyes at her lover's caress and sighed in both resignation and in pleasure. No, she was no good at staying mad at Hiccup, especially when he started to arouse her. "You've also managed to get yourself in a lot of trouble," she replied, not willing to let him have an unequivocal win.

"I also got out of it, with the help of my friends of course." Hiccup cocked his head. "So, what's got you suddenly so thoughtful about the paths our children might take?"

Astrid thought about that for a moment. Then she walked over to the nearest bench and sat down. "Hiccup, do you remember when I proposed that I teach you to sword fight?"

Hiccup paused for a moment and nodded. "Yeah, it was the summer we built The Aerie, wasn't it?" Hiccup grinned. "You're a hard task-master, my darling wife, but I have to say that your teaching has paid off!"

Astrid smirked for a moment before re-focussing on the point of her story. "Have you ever wondered why I suddenly went from just enduring your weirdness to trying to actually get you to learn discipline and some of the arts of war?" Hiccup didn't respond but Astrid could see from the way his green eyes narrowed that he was focussed on the question. "That morning, I just suddenly had this certainty that you could learn to be a warrior. I somehow knew you'd be good with a sword and that, if you stopped trying to be your father, you could be great in your own way." Astrid put her returned knife on the table.

"Hey! I recognise that!" Hiccup sounded surprised. "That's the knife your mother bought you years ago! I thought that was gone for good; where did you find it?"

Astrid grinned lamely. "Right whereâ€¦ and whenâ€¦ I dropped it." Then she began to tell the tale. Much to her surprise, her husband believed it.

End
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